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ABSTRACT

Delinquency intervention and research have undergone changes in recent years. One new line of research has been aimed at mapping out juvenile criminal careers. Findings from this research suggest that involvement in technically delinquent activity may be a transitory, developmental phenomenon related to adolescence. Youth appear to be increasingly involved in antisocial acts up to the age of 16 and then to show a marked decline in antisocial behaviors. The new task for research becomes one of mapping out the separate processes by which youth become involved in, stay involved in, and stop involvement in delinquent behaviors. A developmental perspective should be of major importance in the formulation of delinquency theory and the influences that promote cessation should play a key role in secondary prevention efforts. Delinquency cessation generally occurs at an age that marks a youth's passage into adulthood. It is possible that fear of adult criminal sanctions has a marked impact on the calculation of the likely risk of continued criminal activity. It is also possible that older adolescents have a greater investment in a conventional lifestyle and feel they have more to lose by continued criminal activity. In exploring the cessation of delinquent behavior in late adolescence, it would seem imperative to focus investigation on the juvenile's perceptions of the impending role change into young adulthood. (NRB)

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Toward a Theory of Delinquency Cessation

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Introduction

Delinquency intervention and research have been undergoing a subtle transformation. Historically, the emphasis in juvenile justice has been on individualized treatment, with early intervention considered essential in order to short circuit a youth's slide from predelinquency to more dangerous and costly delinquent criminal activities. Recent research and policy thinking, however, have challenged the basic assumptions behind this approach. Studies of the effects of juvenile justice interventions have highlighted either the generally discouraging lack of clear impact or the possible iatrogenic effects of being processed by this system; the assumed escalation of seriousness in delinquent activity has been shown to be far less clear than expected; and self-report studies of adolescent antisocial activity have shown a large proportion of youth stopping these behaviors on their own without treatment. As a result, researchers, practitioners and policy makers have all been critically re-examining their models of delinquent behavior in an effort to construct new applied theories that do justice to both the patterns of adolescent antisocial behavior and the regularities of the systems that have been constructed to deal with these behaviors.

Perhaps the most far reaching line of recent research has been that aimed at mapping out juvenile criminal careers. Studies like those of Wolfgang, Figlio and Sellin (1972), West and Farrington (1973, 1977), Robins (1966, 1981), and Rutter (see

Rutter & Giller, 1983), coupled with large scale self-report studies (e.g., Ageton & Elliott, 1978), have all emphasized the diffuse and fluid nature of involvement in delinquency. These investigations have made it clear that delinquent behavior is engaged in by a broad range of types of youth and that no one factor or clean set of factors appears to be extremely powerful in explaining continued deliquent involvement (Loeber & Dishion, 1983). In line with Matza's (1964) general conception of delinquency and drift, youth appear to be involved in antisocial activities at different prevalance rates over the course of adolescence, with any sample of those presently involved in such activities being a mix of novices, amateurs, and persistors (Blumstein, Farrington & Moitra, 1985).

Two consistent findings of this line of research deserve particular note because of their implications for the conceptualization of delinquency in general. First, much technically delinquent activity may be more "normal" than "deviant", since a majority of youth engage in certain activities that would qualify them for involvement with the juvenile justice system. Second, there appears to be considerable consistency regarding the onset and decline of many of these activities. Youth appear to be increasingly involved in a constellation of antisocial acts up to the age of 16 and then to show a marked decline in involvement around age 17 (Jessor & Jessor, 1977; Farrington, 1983). The implication of these two findings is that many of the behaviors that bring youth to the attention of authorities might better be thought of as indicators of a developmental phenomenon than as symptoms of a disorder; this behavior may be a transitory

phenomenon related to adolescence. This is not to say that certain youth do not consistently display disturbed and disturbing behavior over different developmental periods (especially highly aggressive youth; see Olweus, 1979), but it is to say that there is a heretofore unconsidered natural onset and recovery process imbedded in the period of adolescence that affects the greater proportion of youth who engage in technically delinquent behavior.

The Difference of a Developmental Perspective

So what does it mean for delinquency theorists to acknowledge that much adolescent antisocial activity is a developmental phenomenon? Foremost, it should mean an increased emphasis on describing and understanding the process of involvement in antisocial activity over the period of adolescence. In short, it introduces the idea of growth interacting with behavior in a consistent fashion. Any delinquent act thus becomes one in a series of behaviors linked over the time period of adolescence, each taking on meaning relative to the developmental context in which it occur. Developmental theorists, however, operate with the implicit (and often explicit) tenet that age alone as an explanatory variable is theoretically vacuuous unless the process of change associated with an age effect can be elaborated. Regarding delinquency, it is clear that we have only begun to explore the change process associated with the observed regularities of antisocial behavior over the period of adolescence. We are presently aware of the developmental nature of antisocial behavior, but we have no clear models of how adolescent development is linked to these behaviors.

One way to achieve some clarity in understanding these patterns of antisocial activity is to investigate the individual stages of involvement associated with certain types of behavior, as has been done with complex adult behaviors such as alcoholism (e.g., Fink, Shapiro, Goldesohn & Dailey, 1969; Robins, Davis & Wish, 1977). Rather than treating involvement in antiscoial behavior as a single variable to be investigated, involvement in these activities can be seen as the result of a series of linked, but distinct, developmental transitions. Taking this perspective, antisocial behavior can be thought of as being initiated, maintained and stopped at different ages as the result of a number of individual and situational factors. The new task for research then becomes one of mapping out the separate processes by which youth become involved in, stay involved in, and stop involvement. The implications of such research for intervention are an increased capacity to assess a youth's inclination to certain predictable transitions and a better idea of how to either short-circuit negative transitions or promote more positive ones. Framed this way, adolescent antisocial behavior becomes less of a nosological entity to be identified and treated and more of a developmental behavioral stream to be redirected.

It is important to note, however, that there is no reason to believe that the factors which initiate certain behaviors are the same ones that either maintain them or stop them. Obviously, each stage is dependent on the youth's completion of the previous process, but the factors which promote transition from one stage to the next need not be identical. Some factors will be consis-

tently important in the intiation, maintenance, and cessation of antisocial behavior, but the exact relationship of these factors could shift over each process and each stage might be affected by unique factors unrelated to the other stages. Each stage, therefore, deserves its own research attention.

To date, however, the vast majority of delinquency research has focused almost exclusively on the initiation or maintenance of particular behaviors. Although delinquency cessation and "maturing out" of crime was recognized as a critical research issue as early as the 1930's (Glueck & Glueck, 1940), the number of systematic studies of this process have been few. The underlying assumption behind delinquency research has instead been that identification and amelioration of the causative factors related to delinquent behavior is the most viable strategy. Thus, research has generally been done by comparing normal and delinquent samples and isolating social or personal factors that distinguish these groups. Intervention is then aimed at changing either the youth's skills or his social environment in order to move him closer to the norm for his age.

When the problem is viewed as a developmental phenomenon, however, it is clear that it is equally or perhaps more logical to focus research and intervention with identified delinquents on the factors related to the cessation of delinquency. Since identified youth have already passed through the initiation and probably the maintenance phase of delinquent involvement, it becomes imperative to devise interventions aimed at moving them into the cessation phase. It seems logical, therefore, that the influences that promote cessation should play a key role in the design of secondary

prevention efforts, since by bolstering or promoting the process of cessation, it might be possible to move identified youth onto a law-abiding adult life sooner. In order to do this, however, it becomes necessary to have much more information than is presently available on this process.

Unfortunately, previous investigations of this issue provide only limited guidance about how to trim the huge list of potentially influential adolescent life events, family influences or cognitive and personality factors. The few previous investigations of this particular question have had small samples and reported generally inconclusive findings. For example, part of West and Farrington's (1977) longitudinal study of London youth included an interview at age 21 with a small group (N = 19) of youth who had "gone straight." These investigators could only comment that their subjects appeared to have gotten a greater investment in a conventional lifestyle and now had more to lose, (e.g., a job, a relationship) by continued involvement in criminal activity. Brown and Gable (Gable & Brown, 1978; Brown & Gable, 1980) examined a sample of youth (N = 10) who had "positive outcomes" after juvenile justice involvement, but their analysis focused exclusively on the duration of involvement in criminal activity in their sample. Finally, a small retrospective study done by myself and John LaRosa (Mulvey & LaRosa, in press) with ten former delinquents failed to provide much more specific guidance about specific life events that appeared to be related to cessation but did highlight the fact that individuals who had made this transition saw cognitive change and internal resolve as precursors to broadly based behavioral change, of which stopping

delinquent activities was only a part.

Again, though, a developmental perspective regarding this behavioral process helps in deciding what variables should be investigated. From this viewpoint, greater consideration should be given to variables that have significance in theories of adolescent development rather than in sociological theories regarding possible causes of delinquent behavior. To date, much delinquency research has examined variables such as age, race, and socioeconomic status with only limited consideration given to what antisocial behavior might mean in terms of the social development of a youth. By starting with a picture of what developmental tasks are being addressed by youth of a certain age in a particular context, however, a different set of less distal and probably more directly alterable variables could receive consideration.

For investigating the process of cessation, it would therefore be necessary to limit the wide range of potentially relevant variables according to an idea of the major developmental tasks and social pressures that an individual is faced with around age 17. Obviously, it is important to recognize that delinquency cessation generally occurs at an age that heralds a youth's passage into adulthood on many levels. With age 18 comes adult responsibility and privilege, and it is still seemingly an open question how much a youth's perception of this transition really matters in the cessation of delinquent activity. At least two testable, rather simple possibilities about the importance of this transition into legal adulthood exist.

The first is the straightforward possibility that fear of adult criminal sanctions has a marked impact on the calculation of the likely risk of continued criminal activity. Under this formulation, a juvenile would cease delinquent activities because the price to be paid if caught as an adult is severe enough to act as an effective deterrent. Because the youth has now come under the purview of the adult criminal justice system, the rules of the game have changed and the adoption of an adult criminal lifestyle is seen as too risky given the likely penalties. This possibility is given considerable credance by proponents of strategies for introducing more of a retributive element into the handling of juvenile offenders. If it is accurate, juveniles who cease delinquent activity should show an increasing estimation of the certainty or severity of punishment likely connected to the commission of certain criminal acts. Presently, however, no systematic line of research appears to have explored this possibility using longitudinal methods.

A second possibility is raised by the interview information reported by West and Farrington (1977). Instead of being more convinced that they will be caught and receive a more severe punishment, juveniles who desist from crime may just have more to lose as a result of a conviction. In other words, their present life has taken on more "roots" that tip the balance of cost and benefits regarding crime. In earlier years, they may not have had a steady job in which they were emotionally invested or a long-term intimate relationship that could be jeopardized by a conviction. In this theoretical model, the

perceived likelihood of conviction and severity of punishment could remain the same for these individuals, but the overall costs of arrest and conviction would be more severe because they now had something substantial hanging in the balance. They may have expanded their social resources.

An alternative formulation is one in which the deterrent impact of turning 18 is a secondary, and probably weak, influence. In this model, the developmental process associated with late adolescence is much more generalized, involving an integration of conceptions of self into a unified new adult role (Erickson, 1968). This task would seem to require a number of social cognitive skills, most notably the ability to project oneself into the future and to be invested in that formulation of future self. It is evident that late adolescence is a period in which ties to family are normally redefined, and independent pursuits are usually established. How the cessation of delinquency fits into this broad change is an open question.

Several specific factors that may promote or inhibit this general transition do appear to warrant further research consideration, however. First, social networks and social support structures could be altered around this time, providing the youth with a new norm for comparison regarding the acceptability or usefulness of antisocial behavior. There is some preliminary evidence (West & Farrington, 1977; Loeber & Dishion, 1983) that continued social ties with a group of offenders is related to continued criminality, but it is unclear whether the severing of such ties precipitates or results from cessation. Youth could,

for instance, establish a longstanding intimate relationship that reduced the amount of time spent with old criminal friends as well as the investment in these relationships.

Second, youth who stop criminal involvement may be more generally socially competent, and thus able to make this transition with more ease and success. Part of the task of late adolescence is to take on a new role as an adult, and individuals who have less limited social capacities could have a lowered estimation of a successful outcome occurring, and thus be less likely to invest energy into directed change. In short, some combination of social competence and lowered estimates of outcome efficacy (Bandura, 1982) could combine to produce avoidance in the learning of new adaptive behaviors.

Finally, there could be specific personality or attributional styles among delinquent youth that make this particular transition difficult and promote continued delinquent activity. Interesting evidence exists regarding the higher likelihood of hostile attributions being made by aggressive younger boys for ambiguous social situations (Dodge & Frame, 1978). It could be that adolescents who stop delinquency have a capacity to read new adult situations with less interference or threat. Such a theoretical formulation could help to explain the myriad of results regarding the potential importance of intrapsychic factors such as self-esteem (e.g., Rosenberg & Rosenberg, 1978) in explaining involvement in delinquency. Examining different methods of social information processing may be a method for understanding how different delinquent youth might respond to the challenge of the transition to adulthood.

It should be noted that all of the above formulations, except for the one regarding the potential importance of social networks, focus on intrapsychic variables. This emphasis is rooted in the belief that the major developmental task of late adolescence is a realignment regarding one's role and an increasing independence from the influence of external controls. Cessation of antisocial behavior at other developmental points may require consideration of other potentially influential factors such as parenting style in the youth's home, but late adolescence seems best portrayed as a time when an individual's behavior is heavily influenced by internal representations of self rather than direct environmental influences. A search for life events or particular situational elements that should exert a uniform effect, therefore, would seem to be a venture with less likely payoff. The central concern of this developmental period is an integration of self concept, and this process seems to be the most logical place to start to find a framework into which delinquency cessation might fit.

Conclusion

This presentation has attempted to highlight the increasing role that a developmental perspective should play in the formulation of delinquency theory. Recent research has shown that antisocial behavior in adolescence is a fluid phenomenon, and that certain periods of adolescence are likely times for the initiation and cessation of involvement in particular acts. I have attempted to argue that more attention should be paid to the cessation process that appears to occur for a number of antisocial acts at about age 17. The advantage of increased know-

ledge regarding cessation would be possibly more efficacious secondary prevention programs with juvenile offenders. Adopting a developmental perspective would also allow researchers to formulate theories about the cessation process with the starting point for theory construction. In the case of the cessation of delinquent behavior in late adolescence, it would seem imperative to focus investigation on the juvenile's perceptions of the impending role change into young adulthood.

Despite the seemingly obvious necessity to consider psychological processes when trying to understand delinquency, it is striking how much research in this area has been targeted at finding out what is consistently and lastingly "wrong" with delinquent youth. The recent emphasis on the developmental nature of antisocial behavior presents the opportunity for researchers to move beyond the search for the critical defect that marks delinquents, and toward a focus on the processes of moving in and out of antisocial behavior. A careful analysis of the delinquency cessation process as it relates to the developmental context of late adolescence (a look at what goes right in juveniles) would seem to be a key component in this new line of investigation.

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